Examining the Concept of Social Networks in Relation to Language Change

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Abstract

The aim of our paper is to perform an in-depth analysis of "social networks" in sociolinguistic research, both as a theoretical concept or construct, as well as a reality which depicts a phenomenon subjected to constant change, one that reflects the socio-cultural realities of the communities in which speakers may find themselves. We achieved such an analysis by first covering the very meaning of a social network, and, subsequently, the connecting topics of network analysis and network structure. This is done through a detailed examination of the relationship that exists between social networks and language variation (thus reviewing a set of variationist studies that utilize the network concept), the processes of language maintenance and shift occurring in bilingual communities, as well as weak ties between speakers of a community, and theories of language change. The final section of the present paper tackles the existing relationship between social networks and the concepts of social class and mobility, where, after the analysis is carried out, we present our own conclusions on the matters which have been put forward in our examination.

Keywords: *social network, close-knit networks, loose-knit networks, community, language variation and change.*

Introduction

The aim of this study is to analyse social networks in sociolinguistic research both as a theoretical concept or construct, as well as a phenomenon subjected to constant change – a phenomenon that reflects the socio-cultural realities of the communities pertaining to the geographical area in which speakers may find themselves. Following prominent researchers in the field of sociolinguistics such as Gumperz, Wei, Eckert, and Milroy to name a few, we shall observe that the most effective way in which such an analysis may be achieved is by first covering the very meaning of a social network, and, subsequently, the topics of network analysis and network structure. Following the model of analysis proposed by Milroy (552-562), we will be examining the relationship between the factors of social networks and language variation, the processes of language maintenance and shift occurring in bilingual

communities, as well as weak ties between speakers of a community, and theories of language change. The final section of the present paper deals with the existing relationship between social networks and the concepts of social class and mobility, and what the implications of this relationship are when it comes to carrying out studies, interviews and other such elements of research that are sociolinguistic in nature.

1. What is a social network?

Brown and Miller (408) define a social network as the web of relationships which is constructed by an individual in a given community, going on to state that this concept is, at times, used as an explanation for different linguistic behaviours employed by different social groups. This definition is similar to the one provided by Milroy (550), who states that a social network can be viewed as "a boundless web of ties which reaches out through a whole society, linking people to one another, however remotely". With this being said, Milroy (549) also states that, contrary to affirmations made by Murray (162), there is no "canonical 'real' procedure" for the analysis of social networks. It is the personal social networks that are viewed as being contextualized within a social framework at the macro-level, that is "bracketed-off" for what Milroy (550) claims are "purely methodological reasons".

According to Mitchell (74), a central principle of network analysis is that the individuals which make up the network in question create personal communities that provide a significant framework for finding the answers to the problems of daily life. Such personal communities are comprised of interpersonal ties of various types and strengths, and the relationships of the structural variety that occur between links may vary (Milroy 550). Another principle of network analysis is that differences regarding the structure or content that exist between networks encroach on the way in which they "directly affect ego", with the term "ego", in this case, referring to the person that, for various reasons, forms the so-called "anchor" of a given network (Milroy 550). Therefore, networks that are made up of mainly strong (dense and multiplex) ties are those that support the localized linguistic norms, due to the fact that they resist pressures to adopt various competing external norms, and, if these ties weaken, then conditions will be produced which are favourable to language change (Milroy 550). When analysing networks, the focus is generally on first-order network ties, which are made up of the people with which an individual interacts directly, and less on second-order ties,

which are those people with which an individual interacts indirectly (Milroy 550). When dealing with first-order networks, it is important to make a distinction between the strong ties of everyday life, that connect friends or family, and the weak ties, that only connect acquaintances (Milroy 550).

Eckert (34-35) puts forward the term "community of practice", which is closely related to the concept of social network discussed by Milroy in her article, and is used for locating "the interactional sites where social meaning is indexed by linguistic elements, and linguistic change and social meaning are co-constructed", defining a community of practice as "an aggregate of people coming together around a particular enterprise". Milroy (552) notes that this type of close-knit network is generally contracted in adolescence, especially in high school, as Eckert herself was researching the social dynamics and language variation of teenagers from Detroit when utilizing the concept of community practice. However, such networks are also capable of evolving in low-status communities, in both urban and rural areas, as various absences give rise to a sense of solidarity between certain individuals and can even, at times, lead to the survival of languages and/or dialects which could be described as "socially disfavoured" (Milroy 552).

2. The relationship between social networks and language variation

Gumperz extensively researches the effects of network structure change, focusing on language choice in the case of bilingual communities. Influenced by his work, Milroy (553-558) identifies a series of what she considers to be "major methods and findings" of researching the relationship between the concept of language variation and that of social network structure. Milroy (553) discusses a study carried out through participant observation in the city of Belfast, Northern Ireland, described as "an ethnographically-oriented data-collection procedure", which saw the recording and subsequent analysis of linguistic data from 46 speakers pertaining to three urban working-class communities, seen as low status, namely Ballymacarrett, Hammer, and Clonard. The study focused on the analysis of eight phonological variables, indexical of the Belfast urban speech community, in relation to the existing network structure of individual speakers (Milroy 553). All three communities presented dense, multiplex, and generally kin-based networks, with men usually being those to contract "denser and more multiplex localized network ties" than women, given the fact that, in traditional employment patterns, the

men went to work (and would even socialize in locations such as bars, after work), while the women stayed at home and took care of their individual household (Milroy 554). It must also be stated that network structure corresponded with different patterns of language use for men and women (Milroy 554).

When measuring a social network structure, the Belfast Study came up with a Network Strength Scale as means of assessing the characteristics of the network of a speaker on a number of five indicators that determine multiplexity and density (Milroy 554). Thus, each indicator was assigned a score of either one or zero, in order to calculate a network strength score for each individual, consisting in the sum of the individual indicator scores, with a focus on the relationships "within the neighbourhood of kin", work, as well as other friendships (Milroy 554). The aforementioned indicators are the following: (a) "membership of a high density, territorially based group"; (b) "having kinship ties with more than two households in the neighbourhood"; (c) "same workplace as at least two others from the neighbourhood"; (d) "same workplace as at least two others of the same gender from the neighbourhood"; (e) "voluntary association with workmates in leisure hours" (Milroy 555). Data analysis proved the existence of a clear relationship established between the personal network structure and phonological variation, with speakers from the neighbourhood with the strongest network ties displaying the strongest preference towards the use of vernacular variants (Milroy 555). This strong tendency is shown to be in the neighbourhood of Ballymacarrett, where, according to Milroy (555), the "patterns of use for the variable (th) are plotted against network structure", as the variable pattern in this case is the presence versus absence of the voiced interdental fricative [ð] in intervocalic contexts occurring in words such as "mother" and "brother". Milroy (555-556) further states that the network scores of women are significantly lower than the men's, with the woman that had the highest (th) index still scoring 10% lower than the lowest score of a man on the same index. It is on the basis of relationships occurring between language and social networks such as the one in the Belfast Study that Milroy (556) considers close-knit networks to constitute a vital mechanism of dialect maintenance.

The concept of network analysis in small-scale communities is useful in the fact that it is able to offer researchers a procedure to aid in dealing with the language variation that takes place between individual speakers, rather than the variation occurring between groups that are constructed "with reference to predetermined social categories" (Milroy 556). A study on intra-community

linguistic variation was conducted by Edwards in an inner-city neighbourhood from Detroit, U.S.A., where age was the main factor that was associated with the choice of variant, yet the participation in neighbourhood culture was, in fact, the most important element in distinguishing age-peers of similar social and educational backgrounds. Edwards viewed this participation as being representative of the relative integration into local networks, and measured the integration in question by devising a Vernacular Culture Index that would be constructed from the nature of the responses given to 10 statements, which could vary from Strongly Disagree (1 point is attributed) to Strongly Agree (4 points are attributed), and which fall into 2 main categories: (a) 5 statements would indicate the physical integration into the neighbourhood, focusing on "localized interactions with kin, workmates, and friends" (for example: "Most of my friends live in this neighbourhood."); (b) the other 5 statements would indicate evaluations of the neighbourhood, as well as black or white friendship ties (for example: "I would like to continue living in this neighbourhood". or "I do not have white friends with which I interact on a regular basis.") (Milroy 556-557). Another study conducted by Lippi-Green in the Austrian village of Grossdorf closely examined personal network structures that existed between individuals of the isolated settlement, through the construction of a scale that utilized 16 indicators, revealing to her gender-specific social trajectories pertaining to language change, as well as language variation in the village.

In the case of migrants, Bortoni-Ricardo theorizes that the change in social structure which takes place in the case of rural to urban migration involves the process of moving from an "insulated" network to an "integrated" network, and can be measured using 2 separate indices: the integration index and the urbanization index. The former assesses the relevant features of the people with which the migrant in question most frequently interacts, with the final score being a measurement of the progress made in transitioning from the "insulated" to the "integrated" network (Milroy 558). The latter focuses on the personal network of the migrant more than anything else, namely on elements such as education level and mobility, with this being done in order for the assessment of the extent to which the contacts of the migrant in question are integrated into urban life (Milroy 558).

3. Language maintenance and shift in bilingual communities

Milroy (558) states that close-knit social networks such as those covered the Belfast study and the Detroit study are "marginal to contemporary urban life".

It is further asserted by Milroy (559) that the type of close-knit structure that appears to aid in the maintenance of community languages is "by no means a residue of an earlier type of social organization", as communities functioning as "powerful systems" in an environment which can be seen as hostile were constructed by stigmatized and marginalized minorities, such as the Puerto Rican migrants from New York in the study of Zentella.

An interesting situation regarding language maintenance in bilingual communities can be found in Gumperz, who associates the move towards monolingualism in the case of Slovenian-German bilingual speakers from Gail Valley, Austria with economic changes. As Milroy (559) observes, the members of this community were embedded in close-knit communities for generations, as the families of farmers relied on each other for support in various endeavours. However, as time went on and the economy changed, factors such as improvements in the road systems and farms selling produce to German-speaking representatives of factories and firms rather than dealing with other locals, the villagers of Gail Valley "lost their reliance on the local support network", and, in time, became monolingual (Milroy 559). Situations that are almost identical can be found both in the study of Gal, which focuses on language shift in the bilingual German-Hungarian community from Oberwart, Austria, as well as in Ó'Riagáin, who studied social network structures in communities from Ireland from 1973 to 1993.

Wei, as well as Milroy and Wei investigate the social trajectories of language shift which correlate the different types of networks with variable patterns of language use, yet their community repertoire is much less complex than the one in Zentella, with both the network types and the language patterns of English-Chinese bilinguals from Tyneside, U.K. being subjected to a quantitative analysis (Milroy 561). The Tyneside study saw the distinction of three migrant groups: the grandparent generation, the parent generation, and the child generation. The grandparent generation mainly associated with kin, the parent generation mainly associated with other British-Chinese individuals, and the child generation mainly associated with non-Chinese individuals. As Milroy (561) points out, there was a correlation that was carried out between the variable network patterns and seven different patterns of language choice, with English and Chinese being employed either monolingually, or in various combinations. Unlike the Belfast study, the bilinguals from Tyneside did not live in one specific neighbourhood, and, therefore, assessments of network strength had to be carried out through a "comparative analysis of individual exchange networks" which was based on a list of 20 individuals that were

identified as "significant and regular contacts" for each bilingual in the study (Milroy 561). The results of the Tyneside study were predictable, with the grandparent generation having the strongest ethnic network and the most extensive use of Chinese, and the child generation having the weakest ethnic network and the most extensive use of English (Milroy 561).

When examining the role of one of the English-Chinese community's most important institutions, the True Jesus Church, Wei asserts that this church acts more as a support mechanism for activities of the social and cultural type, rather than being purely a house of worship, noting that the member families "were distinctive in having contracted pre-migration network ties on the island of Ap Chau, close to Hong Kong" (Wei in Milroy 561). Wei also observes that there is a stronger pattern of Chinese language maintenance in the case of the younger, British-born members of the True Jesus Church (who also utilize Cantonese-English code-mixing more fluently and more frequently), when compared to the young bilinguals in the community, as a whole. Furthermore, Wei attributes these factors to strong ties, which are maintained by the younger individuals of the True Jesus Church, with other members of the same church that are monolingual in Cantonese. Milroy (561) states that conducting a network analysis is not only useful in determining the social trajectory of the language shift, but also aids in uncovering specific patterns of code-switching (as seen in the case of the young bilinguals of the True Jesus Church, from the Tyneside study).

4. **Weak ties between speakers of a community as a cause of language change**

Milroy (562) affirms that the analysis of social networks has generally been carried out in communities with strong ties between the speakers, and that networks with weaker ties between the speakers (the so-called "loose-knit networks") are harder for researchers to work with, at an operational level. She argues that a meaningful comparison between individuals who are different from one another in a large number of aspects (education, occupation, religion, ethnicity, mobility etc.) is harder to achieve when studying a loose-knit network, though such operational difficulties make analysing loose-knit networks an interesting matter for variationists. Granovetter views the "weak tie" model of language as entirely plausible, asserting that weak interpersonal ties constitute important channels for the flow of innovation and influence from one close-knit community to another. Milroy and Milroy go on to state that

speakers who are "in a position to contract many weak ties" are more likely to be the source of the linguistic innovation in question, arguing for the fact that a "weak tie" model of change can justify the tendency displayed by some languages of being more resistant to change than others. Milroy and Milroy theorize that change will be inhibited in the case of an organization with overlapping close-knit networks, but that change will be facilitated in the case of an organization characterized by mobility and a weakening of close ties.

Milroy (563) notes that innovations have a tendency of skipping "from city to city, bypassing intervening territory". This phenomenon constitutes the pattern of the Northern Cities Shift, described as being a change in vowel systems which affects cities from the northern part of the U.S.A. (Labov, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 138). When studying language variation and change in the Norwich, U.K., Trudgill discusses a merger between /f/ ~ /θ/ and /v/ ~ /ð/ ("fin" ~ "thin"; "lava" ~ "lather") in the speech of young, working-class individuals, stating that the young speakers who employ the merged variants are less mobile than the more senior speakers and gravitate towards contracting close ties locally. This merger was also studied by Milroy, in the case of young, working-class speakers from the cities of Sheffield and Derby, U.K., as well as by Stuart-Smith in the city of Glasgow. Milroy (563) postulates that this change may be contact-induced, rather than originating within the communities of speakers. A weak-tie model of language could also offer a principled solution to a case of change described as "problematic", involving the alternating phonolexical variable (u), such as in "pull", "push", and "foot" (Milroy 563-564). The data concerning the distribution of the variable (u) by age, gender, and neighbourhood in the Belfast study shows a rounded and unrounded vowel appear in what Milroy (564) calls a "lexically limited set", with the unrounded variant constituting a strong indexation of working-class identity. This data also issues clear evidence pertaining to a "cross-community consensus between the young (but not middle-aged) speakers on the use of these alternative realizations", to index the factor of gender in the three working-class neighbourhoods and subsequent communities formed in Ballymacarrett, Hammer, and Clonard (Milroy 564). With this being said, Milroy (564) suggests that language change is diffusing from Ballymacarrett, since the middle-aged speakers from that neighbourhood use (u) in order to index gender in generally the same way as the young speakers do in all three communities.

5. Social network, social class and mobility

Drawing from the evidence yielded from the research of language attitudes, it is assumed by sociolinguists that there exists an ideological motivation which underlies the long-term maintenance of norms that are often stigmatized, when dealing with pressures from speech communities that are "numerically or socially more powerful" (Milroy 565-566). This results in speakers wanting to sound different from the social group that they view themselves to be contrasting with (Milroy 565-566). For example, an Australian man that moved to the U.S.A. with his family may purposefully want to "sound Australian" to the people around him, wishing to preserve his socio-cultural and linguistic identity. Thus, the dialect loyalty displayed by the man in the given example, as well as his resistance to change that comes from outside the strong network which he and his family comprise are factors that are said by Milroy (566) to be motivated by the "desire to index group identity". However, motivations such as these are, by themselves, insufficient for maintaining nonstandard dialects in a reliable manner, since the loosening of a close-knit network structure and the mobility of its members are factors that will lead to the disappearance of the social prerequisites for supporting highly localized norms, resulting in dialect levelling (Milroy 566).

The aforementioned factors are of a complex nature. In the Belfast study, the speakers with loose-knit networks "reduce the number of linguistically conditioned allophones of /a/" through the process of eliminating "the extreme back and front variants characteristic of the vernacular system, often converging on a very narrow area of vowel around the centre of the vernacular range" (Milroy 566). Therefore, Milroy views close-knit networks as support mechanisms of a social and sociolinguistic nature that clear the way for the "construction and maintenance of local distinctiveness", and also as a provider of intensive input which is often needed in order to command complex and localized linguistic structures that are not supported by institutional models. She further associates the various network types with various social classes, pairing loose-knit networks with the "socially and geographically mobile" middle classes and close-knit networks with speakers of either very high or very low status (Milroy 566-567). Kerswill and Williams focus on the link which exists between social class and network structure in their study of the relationship established between social class, mobility, and susceptibility to change, that compares language behaviour displayed by

speakers of high and low mobility, of different social positions in the U.K. cities of Reading and Milton Keynes. Their study found that the network structure showed the predicated effect, namely the maintenance of localized norms by the close-knit networks and the facilitating of change on part of the loose-knit networks (Milroy 567). Due to the various language behaviours of mobile high and low status groups, Kerswill and Williams further argue that class and network must be viewed as variables which are independent from one another.

When considering the existing relationship between the factors of class, network, as well as mobility, Milroy (567) states that, because they are constructed at different levels of abstraction, a two-level linguistic theory would be needed - a theory connecting the small-scale networks in which "individuals are embedded and act purposively in their daily lives" with the larger-scale structures that "determine relationships of power at the institutional level". It is further argued that, although close-knit neighbourhoods with strong ties, such as those in Belfast and Detroit, result in a higher degree of social cohesion, they also result in the overall fragmentation in the case of the wider community, and that the weak ties account for a higher degree of linguistic uniformity across large territories (Milroy 568).

Conclusions

Overall, the notions presented in this paper constitute a thorough analysis of social networks, their purpose, structure, and (most importantly) the relationships that are established between social networks and elements such as language variation, language change, language maintenance, language shift, bilingualism and multilingualism, strong or weak community ties, as well as social class and mobility. We saw that there are clear links between such concepts, with the element of influence being present in almost every single case. We hope that, through the analysis which we have undertaken in the paper at hand, we have been able to shed some light on just how complex the matter truly is, with the concept of social dynamics playing an important role in the overall shaping of language, its variation and its constant change.

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